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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000386

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SUBJECT: BAKU HOSTS FIRST AZERBAIJANI AND TURKISH DIASPORA
CONFERENCE

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In an effort to galvanize enhanced cooperation among Azerbaijani and Turkish diaspora organizations, Azerbaijan hosted the first conference of World Azerbaijani and Turkish Diaspora organizations from March 9-10. Reflecting the importance assigned to the event, President Ilham Aliyev, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, and the leader of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Mehmet Ali Talat, in his capacity as head of the diaspora association of Cyprus, attended the conference's opening session. Aliyev's speech at this session called upon diaspora organizations to be more active and identified the conference's "historical achievement" as ensuring that Turkish and Azerbaijani diaspora organizations function "as a single organism." Ramil Hasanov, Director General of the State Committee on Work with Azerbaijanis Living Abroad, told us the GOAJ's goal for the conference was to energize and give direction (unspecified) to diaspora organizations' efforts. Most independent commentators we spoke with support the conference's goals and emphasized the need to counter the Armenian diaspora's influence. At Greek urging, local EU embassies -- except the UK -- boycotted the Conference, opening out of fear that the Conference would adopt statements in support of Northern Cyprus. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (U) Azerbaijan hosted the first conference of World Azerbaijani and Turkish Diaspora organizations from March 9-10. According to local press, the conference included 513 participants from forty-eight countries. President Ilham Aliyev, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, and the leader of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Mehmet Ali Talat attended the opening session on March 9. Participants signed the "Baku Declaration" during the conference, which expressed Azerbaijani and Turkish diaspora organizations' intent to unify their efforts, according to local press.

Aliyev's Speech

¶3. (SBU) President Aliyev gave a speech to the opening session of the conference. Aliyev's speech reaffirmed the traditional close links between Azerbaijan and Turkey, while calling upon diaspora organizations to be more active and collaborative in promoting both countries' interests. Aliyev noted that the Azerbaijan State Committee on Work with Azerbaijanis Living Abroad, which played a key role in organizing the conference, was the focal point for organizing

and mobilizing the Azerbaijani diaspora. Aliyev identified the conference's "historical achievement" as "consolidating our activity" and ensuring that Turkish and Azerbaijani diaspora organizations function "as a single organism." Aliyev later noted that more united efforts should be directed toward strengthening the political and economic influence of the Azerbaijani and Turkish diasporas in different countries.

¶4. (SBU) Several quotations from Aliyev's speech -- taken from Aliyev's official website -- reflect the GOAJ's attempt to energize diaspora activities. Speaking about his goals for the Azerbaijani diaspora, Aliyev said, "it needs to be active, partake in political processes, possess high positions in the business world, and to benefit our opportunities" in this area. Aliyev continued, "...we must support them (diaspora organizations), strengthen their policy in countries they live in. Different events are and must be held. Conferences, publication of books, distribution of realities on our history -- past and present -- this process must be permanent. All NGOs acting abroad must establish very serious cooperation. I repeat, this must be coordinated with members of the government and parliament. We must necessarily do it if we want our voice to be heard and the problems worrying us to be settled rapidly."

¶5. (SBU) Aliyev's speech was not solely focused on Armenia, but it was a key part of the address. In the final section of the speech, Aliyev dealt with the challenges posed to Azerbaijan and Turkey by the "well-organized Armenian lobby" and the Armenian diaspora's "big financial resources." Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan and Turkey have had to face the onslaught of Armenian propaganda, slander, and distortion of historical facts.

BAKU 00000386 002 OF 002

State Committee Hails Conference as Success

¶6. (C) Ramil Hasanov, Director General of the State Committee on Work with Azerbaijanis Living Abroad, told us the GOAJ regards the conference as a success. Hasanov said the GOAJ's goal for the conference was to energize and give direction to the efforts of all the various diaspora organizations. He emphasized that independent organizations had played a role in organizing the conference and that the State Committee primarily provided logistical support. (Comment: From our perspective, the governments of Azerbaijan and/or Turkey appear to have been central in organizing the conference. The conference does not appear to have been a grass-roots or "bottom-up" initiative.) Hasanov said the "Coordination Council of World Azerbaijani and Turkish Diaspora" had helped to organize the conference and that the March 9-10 event was the "founding conference" for this organization. Hasanov told us that a central point of contact for this organization has not yet been identified because it includes many diaspora organizations. Hasanov also sought to deflect attention to the conference's focus on countering the Armenian lobby, stating that the conference "was not aimed at any country."

Other Perspectives

¶7. (C) Most local commentators -- even those with opposition leanings -- we spoke with supported the broad goals of the conference, while some had questions about the level of the GOAJ's involvement in organizing diaspora activities. A common thread from local commentators was that the Azerbaijani diaspora needed to be more unified to counter the strength of the Armenian lobby.

¶8. (C) Nasib Nasibli -- an opposition MP -- said the conference's key goal was to strengthen the Azerbaijani diaspora vis-a-vis the Armenia diaspora. Nasibli said that

while he was a member of the opposition, as an Azerbaijani patriot, he agreed that the Azerbaijani diaspora needs to be more active. Nasibli cautioned, however, that the GOAJ also may be using the conference to better control the diaspora. Leyla Aliyeva -- a prominent Western-educated academic -- said that the common Turkish and Azerbaijani interest in countering the Armenia lobby was a key driver behind the conference. She also claimed that the conference reflected Turkey's growing regional influence. Natig Mammadov, who teaches the history of Turkic peoples at Baku State University and edits the webpage for Radio Free Europe, characterized the conference as "an official demonstration" of a union of interests between Azerbaijani and Turkish diaspora organizations that already exists. Mammadov observed that the diaspora does not act as a cohesive whole, while lamenting the lack of patriotism among some diaspora organizations. Mammadov expressed some cynicism about the efficacy of the conference in energizing the diaspora, saying that it contained an element of "political propaganda."

The Cyprus Angle

¶9. (C) At Greek urging, local EU embassies -- except the UK -- boycotted the high-profile opening session of the conference. According to both Greek and UK diplomats, the EU embassies feared that the Conference would adopt statements in support of Northern Cyprus. The Greek Ambassador privately speculated to us that Greece's role in leading the EU boycott of this high-profile event may have played some role in Minister of Economic Development Heydar Babayev's last-minute decision to cancel his planned March 12 visit to Athens for energy discussions. (Babayev's visit subsequently was rescheduled for May 23-24.)

Comment

¶10. (C) The conference reflects the GOAJ's desire for the Azerbaijani diaspora to play a more active role in countering the perceived strength of the Armenia diaspora in other countries. The GOAJ, as well as broader Azerbaijani society, believe that the Armenia lobby has undermined Azerbaijan's relations with other countries, including with the United States.
DERSE